

DOG PARKS BEST PRACTICES

A well-placed and well-maintained off-leash dog park is an amenity both dog owners and dog lovers can enjoy. The following best practices help you with designing, operating, and maintaining a dog park. New Jersey agencies considering establishing a dog park should also consult with their attorney, health officer, and risk manager before opening a facility.

Location & Site Selection

The dog park should be as large as feasible. Larger parks minimize overcrowding, which can cause fearfulness, aggression, or other undesirable reactions in the dogs. However, the agency must be able to maintain the park's size adequately. Ensure adequate parking adjacent to the park and accessibility for individuals with disabilities and maintenance vehicles.

Separate parks for small and large dogs are recommended. New Jersey municipalities commonly use 25 to 35 pounds as the threshold to distinguish small from large dogs.

Avoid locating the park immediately adjacent to residential areas. If the park must be located close to a residential area, consider creating noise buffers such as shrubbery, fencing, or earthen berms. Dog parks should be clearly separated from playgrounds, athletic fields, schools, hospitals, churches, and heavy-traffic areas. Proximity to pedestrian connections and trails is a positive factor, as it reduces the need for parking.

The chosen site should have a water source and an electricity source if the park is open in the evening. Lighting could present a challenge to neighbors.

The site should be constructed on well-drained, permeable soil. The site should be relatively flat (between 1.5%–4.5% slope); avoid excessive slopes and clay soils. Poor drainage leads to muddy, unsanitary conditions and accelerated surface deterioration. Consider installing a curb or vegetated buffer around the dog park's perimeter to contain surface runoff. Consider small rain gardens or bioswales surrounding the perimeter to capture and treat runoff whenever feasible.

Site dog parks at least 50 feet from floodplains, and avoid flood-prone areas, wetlands, and environmentally sensitive zones. New Jersey's Flood Hazard Area Control Act and Freshwater Wetlands Protection Act may impose additional site-selection restrictions.

Consider assembling an ad hoc committee consisting of local veterinarians and dog clubs.

Park Features & Amenities

Dogs cannot cool themselves as efficiently as humans and should have access to drinking water and shade. Dogs play strenuously in dog parks, and without water, they may suffer heatstroke, which can be fatal. Additionally, dog parks should include shady areas where dogs can lie down, cool off, and rest before continuing to play.

The American Kennel Club and veterinary associations recommend a 6-foot-high galvanized or vinyl-coated chain link perimeter fence. The American Pet Dog Trainers recommend avoiding 90° corners to help prevent timid dogs from feeling 'cornered' by overly enthusiastic or aggressive dogs.

Fences should have a double-gated entry so owners can unleash the dog(s) before entering the open park area. Two or three entrances are preferable. Entrances should be visually shielded from dogs that are already in the park. Dogs tend to gather at entrances/exits, arousal increases, and incidents can quickly occur. A minimum 10' x 10' entry corral with two gates is recommended. If amenities are located within the entry corral, increase the size.

Materials for cleaning up after dogs (bags and garbage cans) are essential to the health of both dogs and humans. Many canine diseases are spread through feces, which attract insects that can transmit them to humans.

The type of surfacing depends on the park's size, context, budget, and maintenance regime. Crusher fines or washed stone dust is a preferred choice for many municipalities. Consider natural turf for larger parks (generally over three acres) if an appropriate maintenance regime is feasible. Wood mulch is generally not recommended due to maintenance issues. Synthetic turf may be appropriate for smaller urban dog runs. Entrance areas should ideally be concrete or hard surface for ease of maintenance, dog safety, and ADA accessibility.

A concrete, asphalt, or poured-in-place rubber pathway forming a loop within the dog park would improve accessibility and allow owners to interact with and monitor their dogs more closely. Provide pathways if space and funding allow.

If the budget and site permit, plant vegetation along the outside of the fence to enhance aesthetics and help mitigate noise. Plant material should be low maintenance and not dangerous (low toxicity, no thorns) to dogs.

Provide benches in convenient locations throughout the dog park area to allow for gathering and resting.

Consider agility equipment (tunnels, ramps, weave poles) to add enrichment and interest to the park, but ensure it is inspected regularly.

Rules

Park managers and owners prioritize the safety of dogs and people. Prominently posted rules and warning signs serve as an important risk management function. Signs should clearly state that the park is unsupervised, that users assume all risks, and that the park operator assumes no responsibility for injuries or damage to personal property. Signs should include emergency contact information (9-1-1) and a non-emergency police number.

It is recommended that the following rules be prominently posted in the parking lot and at the entrance(s) to the park(s).

- Park hours and contact information for maintenance concerns or emergencies
- Owners are responsible for their dogs and any injuries caused by them.
- Owners are responsible for cleaning up after their dogs.
- Dogs must be licensed by the local authority and current on all vaccinations.
- Female dogs in heat are not permitted in the park. Some require that all dogs using the park be spayed or neutered. Consult with your health officer and veterinary advisors when deciding to adopt this requirement.
- An adult must accompany children under 14 years old. A responsible adult should closely supervise children. Consider not permitting children under 8 years old to go to the dog park.
- Owners are NOT permitted to run inside the dog area or get involved in dog play. Dog food, treats, and toys are not permitted in the dog park.
- Park users must have their dogs under voice control. Owners must carry their leashes at all times.
- No more than three dogs per adult user (some limit this to two dogs per adult).
- Dogs that are aggressive to other dogs or people are prohibited from the park.
- Dogs must be on leash until inside the first gate of the entrance.
- Spiked, prong/choke collars are prohibited inside the dog park
- Glass beverage containers are prohibited within the dog park and surrounding area.

Puppies under four to six months of age should not be permitted in the dog park, as they may not have completed their full vaccination series. Some set this threshold at four months; others at six months.

Several New Jersey entities require dog owners to obtain a permit to use the dog park. This permits the park operator to require that the dog owner's homeowner's or renter's insurance policy include liability coverage as a condition of obtaining a dog park permit. It also may require all dog park permit applicants to sign a release of liability and waiver form, acknowledging that use of the park is at their own risk and that the municipality does not assume responsibility for injuries or damage to personal property. The local attorney should review and approve the form. The park operator should reserve the right to revoke a dog park permit from any owner or dog that fails to comply with the rules, or whose dog has bitten or shown aggressive behavior toward a person or another dog. The governing ordinance should establish revocation procedures.

Smoking (including e-cigarettes and vaping devices) and consumption of alcohol are prohibited in and around the dog park. Cigarettes can be extremely dangerous for dogs because of their primary ingredient — nicotine. A cigarette butt in the grass can be pure poison for a dog. Nicotine is a rapid-acting toxin that, in extreme cases, can cause cardiac arrest in a dog, according to the American Kennel Club.

Professional dog walkers and trainers should not be permitted to use the facility for commercial purposes without written permission from the park operator.

All dog bites must be immediately reported to the appropriate police department.

Violations of dog park rules should be subject to fines enforceable by the municipal court. Fines range from \$1,000 to \$2,000 per violation, with some ordinances also providing for imprisonment or community service.

Information Signs

It is recommended that the following advice from dog professionals be posted in gathering areas in the park. This may help educate park users about dog behavior, leading to a more successful park.

- Although dog(s) bullying another dog will happen occasionally, if it occurs often, aggressive or fearful behaviors are more likely to develop in some dogs because of exposure to the dog park. Individual dogs may bully a dog they perceive to be weaker or more submissive. Please watch for this type of behavior and do not allow it to continue. By stopping the behavior, you are teaching your dog to behave appropriately in social situations.
- Aggressive, overly assertive, overly unruly, and under-socialized dogs should not utilize the park. A dog that displays such forceful behavior, even before it reaches the point of fighting with other dogs, can make other dogs excessively fearful. Please monitor your dog so all dogs can enjoy the park.
- Young puppies or fearful dogs are discouraged from utilizing the park, as they may be made more fearful by highly assertive dogs, highly interactive dogs, or rough play. A fearful dog may snap or bite to defend itself and may develop problems that show up outside the confines of a dog park.
- If dogs begin forming loose packs and no one breaks them up, there is a potential for serious behavior problems. These dogs may gang up on weaker dogs and may even physically attack them. If dogs (particularly if they are always the same dogs) continue to pack together, owners should take steps to disrupt 'pack behavior' in their dogs.
- Children and dogs thrive together. However, in a dog park, children should be taught certain 'home' behaviors that strange dogs may misinterpret. Do not assume that just because your child is "used to" getting knocked over by a dog, your child is safe with unfamiliar dogs. Children should not:
 - Get involved in dog play.
 - Feed unfamiliar dogs and should NEVER take anything from a dog's mouth.
 - Approach unfamiliar dogs without the owner's permission.
 - Yell or do anything that will excite the dogs.
- New Jersey Dog Bite Statute Reference: Under N.J.S.A. 4:19-16, the owner of any dog that bites a person while such person is in or on a public place, or lawfully in or on a private place, is liable for damages suffered by the person bitten, regardless of the former viciousness of the dog or the owner's knowledge of such viciousness.

Operations & Maintenance

Ongoing operations and maintenance are critical to a dog park's long-term success and safety. The following guidelines address key operational and maintenance best practices for dog park operators.

Park operators should establish a formal inspection and maintenance program. Conduct inspections regularly, ideally daily or before the park opens. Inspections should assess fencing integrity, gate latches and hinges, surface conditions (holes, erosion, mud), water station functionality, waste bag station stock levels, signage condition, lighting (if applicable), and the presence of any hazardous objects (broken glass, debris, protruding fence wire, toxic materials).

Document all inspections and maintenance activities and retain records. Documentation is critical in the event of litigation. Incident reports should be completed for any injury to a person or dog, and corrective actions taken should be noted.

Park operators should establish a clear incident reporting procedure. Use a standard incident report form for any injury to a person or dog that occurs in or around the dog park. Forward reports to the appropriate department(s) (health, police, parks) and retain them.

Remove or repair hazards as soon as they are reported. Post signage advising patrons if an area is unavailable for use or under repair. Close the park during active maintenance operations.

Restock waste bag stations regularly (at minimum weekly, more frequently at high-use parks). Trash receptacles should be emptied regularly. Consider placing trash receptacles within the entry corral area or immediately outside the dog park fence so maintenance staff can empty them without entering the dog area.

Inspect surfaces for holes, erosion, and excessive wear. Fill holes promptly (remind owners via posted rules that they are responsible for filling any holes their dog digs before leaving). If present, turf areas should be rested periodically to allow recovery.

If dog fountains or water features are provided, ensure they are clean, functional, and not leaking. Inspect and clean water stations regularly, especially in warm weather.

Inspect fencing and gate hardware regularly for damage, rust, loose fasteners, and protruding wire ends. Gates should be self-closing and self-latching. Repairs should be made promptly.

The park operator should reserve the right to close the dog park for maintenance, inclement weather, extreme temperatures, or other circumstances. The operator should communicate closure decisions via posted signage and, where possible, the operator's website and social media.

Include dog park maintenance in the annual budget. Expenses include collecting and removing debris, restocking waste-disposal bags, repairing signs, filling holes, repairing fences, irrigation, and surfacing maintenance. As the park ages and receives more use, maintenance demands will increase.

Consider working with a local dog owner group or club. Members are likely to be regular visitors and will have a vested interest in the park's upkeep. Ask them to report misbehavior, aggression, or irresponsibility. Volunteer clean-up days and community events can supplement maintenance efforts.

Park operators should be aware that there have been documented cases of toxic materials (including food laced with poison) being left in dog parks. Regular inspections help identify out-of-the-ordinary objects quickly. The "no food" rule is an important safeguard against this risk.